

Urban Progress: Lessons from CAP's Roundtable on Expanding Opportunity in America's Urban Areas



SOURCE: AP/Carlos Osorio

A western view of the skyline of the city of Detroit on Friday, November 7, 2014.

By **Tracey Ross** | Tuesday, May 26, 2015

The recent events in Baltimore underscore the need for a national conversation about the challenges facing U.S. cities—from the decades of underinvestment in low-income communities to the enduring effects of racial segregation. Furthermore, a recent

study by Harvard University economists Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and Lawrence F. Katz found that children in Baltimore face the nation's worst odds of escaping poverty, adding to the growing body of research that shows that a person's ZIP code determines his or her life outcomes. The same study estimated that if a person moves to a low-poverty area as a child, he or she will see increased total lifetime earnings of about \$302,000. While urban poverty has been in the headlines in recent weeks, this conversation is long overdue.

In March, the Center for American Progress convened a panel of experts to explore the problems and promise of America's urban centers. The event—“Expanding Opportunity in America's Urban Areas”—co-sponsored by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, or AFSCME, brought together public, private, and nonprofit leaders that included former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton; AFSCME President Lee Saunders; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro; and Aja Brown, mayor of Compton, California (D). Moderated by CAP President Neera Tanden, the lively roundtable discussion produced a number of key takeaways, most notably the need for leaders across sectors to work together and commit resources to revitalize urban areas as a way to improve social mobility and support national prosperity.

Key issues for urban areas

Over the past 50 years, government leaders at all levels have often shifted resources to follow more affluent residents, which means that resources have gone to building roads and infrastructure in suburbs and away from cities. Today, as people of all backgrounds increasingly move to urban areas, it is critical that these communities are good places to live and work. Furthermore, forward-thinking policies must be in place to ensure that cities are not only economic engines for some but that they also create ladders of opportunity for all residents. Only then can urban areas continue to do what they do best for the country: drive innovation,

foster diversity, and support the economy. In order to revitalize and strengthen cities, policymakers must do the following:

1. **Repair and update infrastructure.** America's current infrastructure is largely rooted in the nation's [industrial past](#). As cities began to grow, local governments constructed roads, sewers and water systems, making it easier to live in densely populated areas. Today, that [infrastructure is in disrepair](#), [extreme weather events](#) fueled by climate change are stressing infrastructure, and advancements in technology have changed the way people communicate. The physical infrastructure in cities must be not only maintained but also brought into the future by upgrading water and sewer systems through environmentally sensitive technology, increased broadband access, and a strengthened utility grid that is more resilient to climate change, among other things.
2. **Improve quality of place.** As Bruce Katz, vice president and director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, stated during the CAP roundtable, "Cities have enormous demographic and market wind behind their back." [Specifically](#), Millennials have a strong preference for communities where they can live, work, and play; Latinos increasingly want to live in urban areas; and businesses are looking to move in close proximity of other corporate and research leaders to facilitate collaboration. Communities can capitalize on this resurgence by investing in the amenities of urban areas, while also improving public safety, addressing health disparities, and preserving and creating affordable housing to ensure that people want to—and can afford to—live in cities regardless of their background.
3. **Foster human capital.** Communities must ensure that residents can acquire the skills they need to enter growing career fields and that families can afford to live in cities. This means improving the pipeline from cradle to college and careers through steps such as supporting universal pre-K programs and aligning the needs of employers with high schools and community colleges. Communities also need to pay particular attention to the never employed, the long-term unemployed, and the formerly incarcerated—groups facing the biggest hurdles to employment and self-sufficiency. Communities must engage their local businesses to create strategies for building the soft and hard skills necessary for these individuals to succeed.
4. **Address inequality combined with wage stagnation.** As Secretary Clinton stated at the roundtable, "One of the biggest issues we face is income inequality combined with wage stagnation. They go hand in hand. We don't have enough good jobs, we don't have people being placed into those jobs, and we don't have enough social mobility." Furthermore, [previous research](#) from Chetty and Hendren along with University of California, Berkeley, economists Patrick Kline and Emmanuel Saez reveals that areas with greater mobility tend to display certain characteristics: less racial segregation, less income inequality, better schools, greater social capital, and more stable families.

Developing successful strategies

In addition to identifying the issues that communities should focus on, it is also important to consider how strategies must be implemented in order to maximize their effectiveness. The following strategies were identified during the roundtable as being critical to addressing the challenges facing urban areas:

- **Recognize that issues facing cities are interconnected.** Success in one area is dependent on success in all areas. Communities cannot address education without considering the impacts of affordable housing, health, and exposure to violence on a child’s development.
- **Employ both *bottom-up* and *top-down* approaches.** A bottom-up strategy—where local leaders set the path for transforming their community—is critical to address the unique needs of a particular community. However, a top-down strategy—where the federal government takes the lead in addressing some of the major issues affecting urban areas, such as income inequality—is needed as well.
- **Use evidence-based approaches.** Communities across the country are demonstrating what strategies work, and they have the data to support their findings. Other leaders can build off of confirmed success and adapt proven strategies to their communities.
- **Encourage public-private collaboration.** In order to achieve results, communities need significant investments from both public and private leaders. As mentioned above, low-income communities have suffered from decades of underinvestment. This neglect is further exacerbated by reductions in federal and state funds. Private investment is critical to address the economic, housing, infrastructure, and transportation challenges cities face.
- **Utilize the pillars of *collective impact*.** While specific programs are important for driving people individual-level outcomes, collective impact takes on the task of transforming an entire system and is key to community-wide outcomes. The collective impact strategy achieves these goals by bringing together stakeholders to build a common agenda, focusing on mutually reinforcing activities, using data to drive results, and directing resources toward what works.
- **Embrace inclusivity.** As AFSCME President Saunders stated at the roundtable, “We cannot gentrify our way to a better tomorrow.” Every community must be included in shaping goals and strategies for our urban centers. Simply put, cities cannot depend on the arrival of new residents to transform a community; the current residents of high-poverty communities matter, and their success is critical to the strength of the country. Communities must work for all people.

Promising practices

During the March roundtable discussion, the following efforts were cited as models that offer promising solutions to the problems facing America’s cities.

- **San Antonio: Forming cross-sector partnerships to revitalize communities.** In the Eastside neighborhood of San Antonio, a predominately Latino and African American community, nearly 4 in 10 adults do not have a high school diploma, and the violent crime rate is 50 percent higher than in the rest of the city. In 2010, the city of San Antonio hosted a three-meeting summit of Eastside residents, civic and neighborhood leaders, stakeholders, developers, property and business owners, and public-sector entities to discuss how to launch the neighborhood’s redevelopment. That summit helped lay the foundation that allowed San Antonio to secure millions of dollars in federal funding, as well as a Promise Zones designation from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Through collaboration and citizen engagement, the Eastside community is well on its way to improving economic opportunity, education, health, housing, and public safety.
- **Compton, California: Preventing and mitigating violent crime.** In 2013, Aja Brown started her term as mayor by addressing the public safety concerns of her residents. She established the Community Safety Task Force with subcommittees focused on gang

intervention and prevention, eradicating human trafficking, and educating youth and parents on the dangers of drugs and other threats to human health and safety. In 2014, Mayor Brown organized [biweekly meetings with gang leaders](#) and offered job-training opportunities in exchange for a collective ceasefire. The mayor's efforts in engaging Compton's gangs—including using former members as mentors to residents entangled with gangs—have decreased homicides and violent crime to the lowest levels in decades, with a [40 percent drop](#) in violent crime over the first eight months of the program.

- **New York City: Aligning education and technical skills training.** New York's Career and Technical Education program, or CTE, has shown positive results in aligning the needs of employers with the skills of students. A CTE high school graduate receives a diploma as well as a [Career and Technical Endorsement](#), allowing graduates to pursue a number of paths, including four-year and two-year colleges, apprenticeships, technical schools, and training programs related to jobs. Furthermore, a [2014 Community Service Society report](#) that CTE students have a lower risk of dropping out of high school, higher rates of graduating on time, and are more likely to complete college prep courses. The report also found that CTE students are more likely to graduate than their peers who are enrolled in non-CTE schools, and black and Latino boys and students who tested slightly below average in eighth grade have seen the most improvement in graduation rates in CTE schools.
- **Los Angeles: Using data to drive results of initiatives.** Through the federal Promise Zones initiative, the Los Angeles Promise Zone is tracking 23 different indicators at the individual, family, and household levels for the zone's core goals—including improved academic outcomes and wraparound services for students and families. [Data include](#) information on grades; attendance; services provided to students by organizations; and background information on families, such as their education and health. According to Dixon Slingerland, executive director of the Youth Policy Institute in Los Angeles, "... For the first time, the school district is sharing student-level data with our data system, so we can track individual kids." Slingerland said this data will help the city and its partners ensure they are on track to reach their goals and change course when necessary.

Conclusion

Our nation's urban centers are the engines of the U.S. economy, creating opportunities for suburban, rural, and tribal areas alike. The March roundtable discussion advanced the conversation around a number of pressing issues for urban communities, but it is clear that this discussion must be ongoing. In order to address the problems facing urban areas, leaders from across sectors and disciplines must work together.

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